

## **Staff Nurse Satisfaction, Patient Loads, and Short Staffing Effects in North Carolina**

### **Findings from the 2001 Survey of Staff Nurses in North Carolina**

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Over the past ten years many changes have occurred in the health care industry that have had a direct impact on the work of nurses. The early part of the 1990s saw changes in how hospitals and other service delivery organizations were reimbursed by state and federal governments, as well as private insurance companies, for the services they provide. The mid 1990s marked the rapid expansion of managed care policies in North Carolina that resulted in declining reimbursement rates and changes in the location of patient care services from hospital in-patient units to ambulatory care settings and community-based agencies. In the last part of the decade patient care inside our hospitals continued to intensify as patients admitted to the hospital became sicker, and patient stays became shorter. However, the volume of patients did not decrease, and in many areas of the state patient volumes have increased steadily, thanks to the consistent growth in the state's population over the past 10 years.

The impact of these events on nursing in North Carolina has been an increase in the demand for nurses outside of the traditional hospital setting, and also an increase in demand within hospital facilities and systems as the complexity of patient care intensifies. For many of the nurses in these environments, the size of their daily patient loads have increased at the same time that care has become more complex, and the size of the nursing workforce has not increased enough to keep pace. Keeping nurses on the job in this kind of environment (especially in hospitals), and bringing new ones into the profession, will be the challenge of the next decade.

Research has shown that satisfaction with work and career are important indicators for the stability of the workforce. Workers in general, and nurses in particular, who are satisfied with the various aspects of their job environment and/or their career choice are less likely to leave that job or career. This report profiles RN and LPN staff nurses' patient loads as measured by the number of patients they report being responsible for on an average day, the extent to which they think short staffing has affected their ability to meet their patients' needs, and how satisfied they are with their jobs and their career choice. It also examines the interaction between these three important elements by looking at how patient loads and short staffing frequency affect levels of satisfaction for staff nurses in North Carolina. Since all three of these factors can be expected to vary significantly by a nurse's employment setting, any analyses which include patient loads will present the findings within the context of employment setting.

### ***About the Survey***

This report is part of a larger study that explores staff nurse attitudes about their work environments. During the summer of 2001, the North Carolina Center for Nursing surveyed staff